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Cultural Policy in Azerbaijan

Report of an independent panel of European examiners

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The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily engage the responsibility of the Council of Europe.

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

The evaluation of the cultural policy of Azerbaijan started after the request formulated by the Ministry of Culture of this country, as soon as Azerbaijan became a member of the Council of Europe. The process is part of the STAGE Project, initiated by the Department of Cultural Policies and Action of the Council of Europe for the three Caucasus countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

According to what has already become a tradition, a National Report is prepared by the country in question, followed by visits of an independent team of experts designated by the Council of Europe with the review of the national cultural policy.

Two visits, of one week each, were organized for the independent group of experts in charge with the review of the cultural national policy: in May 2001, followed by a second one, initially due for October of the same year, and postponed for end of January 2002, due to the political tensions in the region. During the first visit, that took place only in Baku, with the exception of short drives to sites located in the surrounding area, the experts' team had mainly meetings with Ministry of Culture officials, with media, NGOs and minorities representatives, and also visits and talks at the National Museum, National Library, an art gallery, the Soros Foundation, the Eurasia Foundation. The second visit included, besides a second round of ministerial talks, trips to Gobustan, Guba, Shekhi and a brief stop at Agdash, and subsequent visits of museums, historic monuments, theaters and meetings with local authorities, cultural managers, artists.

The first and traditional source of information for cultural policy reviews, usually available in the case of other countries that underwent the same process, before the experts' country visits, is the National Report, handled by national teams that are either under the authority of ministries of culture, or independent and enjoying governmental technical, logistical and financial support. Such reports are also the result of wide consultations with cultural organizations, cultural actors, artists, NGOs, of sociological studies and research. In Azerbaijan, for reasons the experts' team understands (the brief lapse of time since the country's admission as a member of the Council of Europe, followed immediately by the application for the evaluation of the cultural policy, as well as the difficulties met with information gathering and retrieval and reliable databases), such a report did not exist beforehand. The National Report started to be gradually written, by the Ministry National Report team in parallel with the experts' evaluation. The experts' team had as only previous information the country profile "Cultural Policy in Azerbaijan", of the series "Cultural Policies in Europe: a Compendium of Basic Facts and Trends" (Council of Europe/ERICarts: Compendium 2000). This information was updated and new chapters were added during the talks had at the Ministry of Culture with the occasion of the two country visits and in the following months.

We recognize that the preparation of a National Report is an important first step in the country's cultural policy strategy. Together with the experts' review, it offers a comprehensive view of the realities of the country, and of the future trends of cultural policy, open to further national debates and subsequent medium and long term strategic decisions.

The experts' team wishes to congratulate the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan for this decision and the huge amount of dedicated work for the National Report.

We are particularly thankful to Mr. Polad Byulbyuloglu, Minister of Culture, whose dynamic, reform-oriented leadership is essential to the cultural development of Azerbaijan, and who surrounded with commendable attention and care the experts' mission.

Our warm thanks go to Mrs. Sevda Mamedalieva, Secretary of State, Mrs. Nigar Akhundova, Director for International Relations, and the whole National Report Team, for their will to implement reform, their hard and valuable work, their disponibility as permanent interlocutors and for the organization of the two country visits, unfortunately too brief for the diversity and complexity of both the Azeri culture and the difficulties of the country.

We are also thankful for the information shared and their disponibility to all our interlocutors at the meetings and discussions we had during our two visits. Their list is presented in Annex nr.1.

Our thanks and congratulations go to Mrs. Vera Boltho, Head of the Department for Cultural Policies and Action at the Council of Europe, for her enlightened vision and leadership, and to Ms. Dorina Bodea, coordinator of the Stage Project, for her commendable work and organization of the programme.

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1 The first state formations in the territory of modern Azerbaijan date back in the 1st millenium B.C.: the Manna state, conquered in the 8th century B.C. by the Medes. The official religion became Zoroastrism, that can be related to the natural burning fires from the surface oil deposits. In the 6th century B.C., the Achaemenid Persians, under Cyrus the Great, took over part of today's Azerbaijan territory.

Two centuries later, in 330 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered the Achaemenid Empire and left the Persian satraps to rule the territory. It is currently admitted that the old name of the country – Atropatena or Atropatakan – is connected with the name of Atropates (“protected by fire”), a Persian general appointed by Alexander the Great. It is in Atropatena and the neighbouring territory – Caucasian Albania – that the process of national identity of the country started.

Christianism, that was embraced early in Caucasus countries, penetrated also in Azerbaijan.

Later on, in the 5th century, the Albanic alphabet was introduced and it contributed to a first notable educational and cultural development.

The territory of Azerbaijan was conquered by the Arabs, that brought Islam at the beginning of the 8th century, and the country became a part of the Arab Khalifat. This meant several centuries of cultural flourishing and a distinct contribution to Moslem culture, in science, poetry, architecture.

Azerbaijan was fought over by Persia and Turkey for centuries. Later, at the beginning of the 18th century, Russia entered the competition for a few years only, to come back in a hundred years time. In 1828, the northern part of Azerbaijan was conquered by Russia, while the south was taken by Iran.

Azeris speak a Turkic language, very near to modern Turkish; at the same time they are Shi'ite Moslems, like most Iranians.

The last century in the country's history was marked by huge political, economic, social and cultural transformations.

First of all, Baku, the country's capital, and the surrounding region, became, by the turn of the twentieth century, the largest producer and exporter of oil in the world. This brought about a sudden and almost explosive development in all spheres of economic, political and cultural life. Various industries flourished, a new, eclectic and imaginative architecture changed all of a sudden Baku, that had been so far an oriental, almost medieval city, communications, newspapers, various cultural institutions and buildings, such as the magnificent Opera House, mushroomed, as well as cultural associations, an effervescent political life developed, and an important movement of national and cultural identity became significant, with huge consequences and outcomes.

In 1918 Azerbaijan proclaimed its Declaration of Independence, but only two years later the country fell under the Soviet domination, becoming part of USSR, for more than 70 years.

In the first half of the century a massive sovietisation of the country followed, like in the other soviet republics. This process had also, of course, as it was meant to, a dramatic influence on the country's national identity, cultural heritage and awareness.

To give one example, the alphabet only was changed twice: from Arabic to Latin and later on from Latin to Cyrillic.

In 1991 Azerbaijan's independence was proclaimed through a Constitutional Act. The same year, the Latin alphabet was reintroduced.

A new Constitution was ratified in 1995.

1.2 Azerbaijan is a presidential republic. The present Head of State, Heydar Aliyev, elected for the first time in 1993 for five years, was reelected in 1998.

The Azeri Parliament (National Assembly) confirms the Council of Ministers (Government), including the Prime Minister, appointed by the President.

1.3 The dismantling of the Soviet Union and of the Comecon were followed by the collapse from one day to the other of the traditional markets available for the newly independent republics. Moreover, each former Soviet republic was assigned the role to provide in a certain sector of the economy, fact that left the other sectors underdeveloped. The war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabagh, stopped by a cease-fire in 1994, but whose peace negotiations are still under way, left Azerbaijan without one fifth of its territory and with a figure ranging between 700,000 and 1 million internal refugees.

An economic reform and privatization started in the country only after 1995. The only foreseeable prospect for economic development, lies for the time being in a second boom of the oil industry.

2. CULTURAL LEGISLATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL POLICIES

The previous historical and political context was presented in order to better grasp the deep and multifold transformation cultural policies have to aim at.

The cultural sector in Azerbaijan was seriously influenced by the deep economic and political crisis, as well as the high unemployment rate, that struck the country in the early and mid '90s. To that we must add the excessive centralization and authoritarianism of the former Soviet cultural authorities, and also the fact that cultural identity and the cultural rights of the former Soviet republics, though encouraged in a certain festive way, have always been relegated to a second plan.

Culture followed the same pattern as in the case of the economic disaster that struck all the former soviet republics after the collapse of the traditional Comecon markets. Being the most sensitive domain, subject to ideological pressures and close party scrutiny, a powerful apparatus was in function, in Azerbaijan and elsewhere, controlling the very strict institutional networks established for every cultural domain, creating thus a compulsory, uniform institutional communication and the same kind of historic centralized budgets. After independence, this system was naturally also dismantled and each republic had to create a reform-oriented public policy at a national level, this time according to requirements that were totally different – the building up of democratic institutions, the rule of law, the respect of human rights and of cultural diversity. No national legislation was available.

2.1. Culture and Reform

Although the budget for culture is small, due mainly to the economic difficulties of transition and the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict with Armenia, the general impression is that, at the difference of other countries, where culture runs the risk of being marginalized, in Azerbaijan it is regarded as an important asset of society, of the country's identity and future development, and not relegated to a leisure and adornment role, to be looked after later, when things would go better, or to the role of an useful rhetorical instrument.

However, in spite of the fact that this positive attitude towards culture is identifiable at most levels, the National Report states that culture was not officially included as a reform chapter, which meant, according to the same report, no access to additional state-level facilities or to international organizations funding.

The cultural strategies of the country are designed and decided at various levels:

- the Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Cultural Issues and the Department of Social Legislation of the Azerbaijan Parliament, regarding legislation;
- the Department of Humanitarian Policies of the Presidential Office;
- the Department of Science, Culture, National Education and Social Issues of the Cabinet of Ministers, where budget is drafted, and, finally,
- the Ministry of Culture, in charge with designing and implementing reform in all sectors of cultural life.

The Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan, that has its own Parliament, Cabinet of Ministers and Ministry of Culture, carries out the same cultural policy, once the orientations have been established. There was no information available for the experts' team to ascertain whether a free space for adapting any policies to this autonomous republic specific needs exists.

A two-way process is taking place at the level of the Ministry of Culture: on the one hand, in the reform design, there is an identifiable debut of decentralization and deconcentration steps, and, on the other hand, a recent recentralization under its authority, of bodies that used to be independent or existed previously under a different administration. This is the case of the historic monuments committee, of cinematography and publishing. The national report states that such a decision was necessary for strategic reasons, in order to implement reform in all these fields at the same pace and leave little to lag behind.

2.2. Cultural Legislation

The implementation of valid cultural policies cannot be considered in the absence of an adequate legislation in the field.

In the case of Azerbaijan, a supplementary difficulty lies in the fact that the ministries, including the Ministry of Culture, have no legislative initiative, which slows down the process of new legislation adoption and implementation. According to the present state of the matter, a law project must be sent to the President's Office, then it goes to Parliament. The Ministry of Culture experts have access to the cultural department of the President's Office and also to the Parliament cultural committee. The definition of the rights of the executive authorities still represents a problem. At this time, a law does not contain the identification of the executive authority in charge with the implementation. It is only when it goes back to the President's Office, for promulgation, that the President designates the implementing authority, which makes the circuit rather complicated and subject to unforeseen changes.

Nevertheless, between 1995-2001, 15 important laws for the cultural field have been passed in Parliament, regarding: copyright, advertising, the law of culture, heritage protection, grants, freedom of information, dissemination of information, architecture, libraries, museums, archives, media, publishing houses, tourism, urban planning. Another law, regarding the protection of the Azerbaijani language, until recently still in Parliament, may have been adopted by now. At the end of 2001 the media legislation was reconsidered. A Presidential Bill, "Additional measures meant to increase state care about mass media" introduced the following changes: long term and privileged credits for media development; abolition of import customs taxes for newspapers' paper; extension of broadcasting of private TV and radio companies; regulations regarding foreign TV companies broadcasting. There are also in Parliament other bills on: "Theater and theater activities", "Creative unions and creative workers", "National reserves and national parks". The texts of all these bills were not accessible for the experts' team.

If we add to the recent legislation other 4 laws adopted in the first years after the country's independence, the total sum is 19, which expresses well a commendable endeavour to design cultural policies compatible with contemporary legal requirements.

Unfortunately, the texts of the laws are not translated and thus they were not available for the experts' team, in order to compare them with the existing international legislation in the field; the result was that they had to be judged only by the effects some of them have recently started to produce.

It also seems that the regulatory acts that ensure the effective implementation of some of the most recent laws are still lacking, fact that places them for the time being in the category of legal documents momentarily deprived of authority.

The awareness degree of the people involved in the cultural sector about the new, available cultural legislation is hard to evaluate. In some cases even in Baku, but more frequently during the visits the experts' team made in the provinces, rather numerous were those that had a rather remote or fragmentary knowledge of the cultural legislation they were supposed to apply or to take advantage of. A better dissemination of this basic feature of cultural reform, either as a part of professional training, or simply by increasing its accessibility, is highly desirable.

2.3. Cultural Policies in Times of Transition

Cultural policy is defined, according to the Council of Europe report "In from the Margins", as "the overall framework of public measures in the cultural field. They may be taken by national governments and regional and local authorities, or their agencies. A policy requires explicitly defined goals. In order to realise these goals, there need to be mechanisms to enable planning, implementation and evaluation". This also means the philosophy, the mindset and a set of medium and long-term objectives that would rethink culture as a dimension of development.

In the National Report, the first statement about the development of cultural policy is about how the Ministry of Culture places itself, bearing in mind the main principles that have guided most European countries in the last decades, and comparing them with the realities of the country. There are three main priorities that are mentioned: preservation of cultural and historic heritage (that includes the whole infrastructure of cultural institutions), support to creativity, increasing the understanding and perception of culture as a factor of human development. In addition, the report lists a number of goals and responsibilities assumed by the government and the Ministry of Culture, as the institution designated to pursue and implement them: search for alternative sources of financing, training in cultural administration, elaboration of strategies of cultural development, the setting up of an endowment fund for culture. In other chapters along the Report, there are frequent mentions of other priorities and commitments – decentralization and deconcentration of cultural administration, building up partnerships with NGOs and other civil society organizations, policies for the young.

Apart from legislation, financing is the domain where cultural reform can provoke and maintain visible progress. Due to the economic difficulties of the country, aggravated by war and the still unsolved situation of the refugees, the budget for culture is far from being sufficient for the implementation of new provisions. From the National Report, it is also clear that 95% of culture financing comes from the state budget and , apart from very restrictive categories of extrabudgetary funds cultural institutions are allowed to create and use, which never amount to more than 1% of their budget, there is little left as supplementary resources. The chapter on financing in the National Report uses statistical data available only starting with 1997. A yearly budget increase is visible, in accordance with the provisions of the Law on Culture, although it is difficult to ascertain the difference between the budget increase and the inflation rate. However, a noticeable sectorial difference, demonstrating a change of

policy, appears, for instance, in the case of monuments' restoration, where the budget almost doubled in 2001.

A big impediment in the modernization of the financial support lies in the historic structure of the budget, that remained unchanged over the years examined in the report. There is, however, a good sign in the deconcentrated evolution of the budget, 75-80% of it being distributed at the local level, where decisions are taken between the local authorities and the cultural departments of the regions.

The budget for cultural institutions (museums, libraries, cultural houses) is still divided into three categories: salaries and social payments; renting, repairs and maintenance of the buildings; art acquisitions (music was not on the list, but we supposed that musical works were included), and also books and periodicals for the libraries' collections. The third category has the lowest budget percentage, not exceeding 10%. The same is valid for locally administered cultural institutions, which leaves little space for initiatives and local projects.

Another issue that needs care and attention is the tax policy. Quite recently, in January 2002, changes in the tax code were introduced, that hinder the reform and even the mere existence of most cultural institutions. Until that date, the existing tax regulations exempted from VAT and income taxes small institutions whose turn-over to the state did not exceed 21.000 USD in three months, and only the largest and most important cultural institutions had to pay 18% VAT and 27% income taxes, which was, anyway, very difficult for them. Starting with the new regulations, that lowered the turn-over level to 6300 USD, even the small cultural institutions, that had been able to survive with difficulty, are now threatened to close down.

Under these circumstances, and not only, the Ministry is asking for new taxation regulations, that would grant full VAT exemption to cultural institutions. In the case of publishing, a VAT 0 is considered to be the most appropriate.

In this situation, combined with a bureaucratic inertia and a crisis of specialized staff, as it was often stated by our interlocutors at the Ministry level, particularly the team in charge with the National Report, there is still an overwhelming dependence of centralized decisions, of the Ministry as a „provider”, valid for financial issues, but also for professional ones, such as the theatres' repertoires. We could not establish a clear-cut correlation, in the latter case, whether there is a direct relationship between the approval of the repertoire and the granting of funds for a theater's performance, or we can speak only of institutional relationship inertia.

Occasional and unsystematic financial support, particularly for artistic events, is obtained from the National Fund for Culture, but the experts' team could not identify what were the mechanisms that operated its functioning.

The salaries of people in the cultural sector - artists, writers or administrators – are extremely low, even if compared with the general salaries' level in the country, ranging between 10,5 and 21 USD per month, which has as one of the consequences the outflow of specialists and the difficulty of hiring trained personnel. In order to change the situation for some institutions or categories, presidential decrees were issued for : “Improving the activity of the Azerbaijani Symphony Orchestra”, “Provision of creative people with personal pensions”, “Provision of young talents included in the Red Book with presidential stipends”, “Social provision for the ballet troupe of Azerbaijan State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet”, “Provision of young writers with personal stipends”. There is also a “Presidential decree of Government awards”.

We do not know what are the criteria for awards and stipends granting, neither was there any accessible information on the rather recent regulations on accepting and using grants.

Foreign investments, financial support and joint ventures in the cultural field are encouraged. A good example is the Azerbaijani International Cinema Company, the result of a joint venture between the Union of Cinematographers and ITIL, a British private company. To support the Azerbaijani State Opera and Ballet Theatre, an Opera Trust Fund was created, with the contribution of foreign oil companies, banks and other organizations. Such examples should be widely publicized and extended to other institutions or sectors.

There are two major NGOs that contribute substantially to the implementation of the country's cultural policy: the Soros Foundation and the Eurasia Foundation. Along with supporting the Ministry of Culture sectorial strategy (providing, for instance, a computerized network for the State Library „M.F.Akhundov”) in Baku, they are the main providers of funding for cultural NGOs, applications for projects coming from individual artists, young people, etc. Although there are 80 cultural NGOs registered with the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Culture does not support them financially. Its declared intention is however, to broaden contacts and involve these civil society organizations in joint projects. Like in other countries, such organizations , that contribute to the transition between closed and open societies, are important vehicles of communication between government structures, public institutions, communities, individuals.

The Soros Foundation has recently financed for the Ministry of Culture a sociological survey on cultural participation, conducted by SIAR – Social and Marketing Research Center, that was lately included in the National Report. The survey takes into consideration only cultural industries, including computer technology. There is no information in the National Report about the extension of the population sampling. We trust, as this was a national conducted survey, that the usual age, education, urban/rural areas, gender categories were taken into consideration. During the second visit to Baku, we met the SIAR team, that was just concluding the survey, and were impressed by its competence and commitment. For the other cultural sectors, the Ministry used the data provided by its Scientific-Methodological Center and the Central Statistical Board. The data interpretation reveals highly interesting issues regarding the trends followed by cultural participation in the last years. We would identify three major categories: 1. Trends common to other countries: a major increase in TV and video films watching; a high figure of radio listeners (46%), with a preference for music (64%) and news (28%), and newspaper readers (52%); a switching of interest from classical literature, that became circumscribed to elite categories, in favour of thrillers and melodrama books, that are occupying now the market; 68% of the readers have their own book collections at home, the average number of books owned being 260; a huge increase in the number of computer users, although the general figures for Azerbaijan are much smaller, from economic reasons (13% of the population uses now computers: 11% at home; 40% in internet cafes, 20% in educational institutions, 28% at work), and there is a substantial difference between Baku and the provinces (16% compared to 9%). 2. Trends characteristic to Azerbaijan, due to the country's transition difficulties: dramatic droppings in the numbers of the theater public (from 1.376.000 in 1990 to 853.000 in 1999), library readers (from 4.145.000 in 1990 to 2.899.000 in 1999) and cinema goers (from 30.159.000 in 1990 to 140.000 in 1999). 3. Trends that revealed encouraging for sectorial policies, i.e. 44% of the cinema public prefer national films, which fully justifies the policy designed for supporting the Azeri film production.

We consider essential that such surveys are pursued in the future, in order to have the right information background for the continuation of the cultural policy reform the Ministry has started. It is very hard, and the results can be only limited or artificial, to establish policies without any feedback concerning what the needs and expectations are at the other end – the institutions, cultural actors, the various layers and sectors, Baku and the provinces, cities and small communities, minorities other than national ones, the aged and the young, people with different education levels, etc. Cultural policies must also have the flexibility and the dynamism that would enable them to adapt quickly to economic and political changes. Only a professional survey and research, reaching all the sectors and people involved, can create a good basis for the continuation of reform, starting with the improvement of legislation, financing, institutional strengthening, and, last but not least, creating a climate of confidence and participation. We trust that international agencies would support such an initiative, knowing the importance of the outcomes. Examples exist in most of the countries that went through the process of evaluating their national cultural policy, as a natural outcome for the continuation of the reform.

3. CULTURE AND IDENTITY: NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND MINORITY PERSPECTIVES AND ISSUES

As a former Soviet Union republic, Azerbaijan was entirely entitled to start a quest for its identity, the more so as the country had for many decades faced a double identity – that of being part of a totalitarian empire and a national one. Because communism excelled in erasing traditions and values, and also in manipulating and distorting history, with the view of making it serve the installed regime's purposes, each of the former Soviet republics had to re-discover their own national identity. It is true, however, that the three Southern Caucasus republics, being at the outskirts of the Soviet empire, had been allowed in a larger measure than others to preserve their cultural identity, after a massive destruction ordered by Stalin in the first decades of Soviet rule.

National identity is not conceivable without any reference to culture. It was also in the name of culture, and particularly of heritage and identity, that intolerance and hatred made their way into the region, almost simultaneously, in the last years of the Soviet empire, before the three Transcaucasian countries became independent. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabagh was also as a consequence of Stalin's earlier policy of creating autonomous territories within the borders of the former Soviet Union republics, leaving these situations as sources of latent conflicts and blackmail. One of the outcomes for Azerbaijan, besides war damages and increased economic difficulties, was the large number of refugees from Nagorno-Karabagh and the other occupied districts – around 800,000 displaced people -, many of whom still live in very precarious conditions: tent camps, shacks, railway wagons, totally unsuitable for health and social care, for education, with a high unemployment rate, particularly among women, and low opportunities for living a normal community life. Sabirabad, Mugani and Saatli were the refugees' camps the experts' team visited during their first trip to Azerbaijan; it was impressive to see how these people were struggling to preserve their identity and local communities memory, and to transmit it to their children.

It is culture again that can help developing a shared values awareness, a national identity within multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue, both carriers of development and cooperation. This is the policy that was designed and developed by the Council of Europe, through the Stage Project. At a recent Ministerial Colloquy, organized under the Stage Project at Montreux, at the invitation of the Swiss Federal Office for Culture, with the participation of the Ministers of Culture from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and, as observer countries, Greece, Russia, Switzerland, Turkey and the Ukraine, a final declaration text was unanimously agreed, regarding the essential role of culture for the edification of a common space of democracy, human rights respect, dialogue, stability and peace. Regional co-operation was regarded as a goal to be achieved and the three Transcaucasian countries ministers committed themselves to reinforce exchanges and cultural initiatives.

Similar initiatives, for sectorial projects, are also under way, with the support of the Soros Foundation. To give only one example, a regional computerized library network, allowing the access and sharing of information of the three countries was installed at the Regional Training Centre for Librarians and Library Software Specialists.

"All citizens have equal rights, but there is no understanding for a different identity". This was the statement of one member of the minorities' organizations the experts' team met with, during the first visit to Azerbaijan. The country has a large variety of ethnic minorities and an

equally high number of languages and dialects. The approach of minorities issues has much improved in the last few years, but at times it seems to be still impregnated with a kind of residual „stage” festivism from soviet times. It is true that there are 17 cultural centers of minorities all over the country (Russian, Georgian, Ukrainian, Kurdish, Lezghin, Slavic, Jewish - of the Mountain Jews, European and Georgian Jews -, Tatar, Avar, Turkish, Ingloy, Talish, and others), as well as TV and radio programmes. As a sad consequence of war, the Armenian minority has severely decreased in Azerbaijan; from 475.519 Armenians in 1979 (7,9% of the population), and in 1989, 390.500 (5,6%), in 1999 there were reported only 120,700 (1,5 %). It is worth noticing that the Armenian minority was, together with the Russian one, the largest minority in Azerbaijan, and that the same decrease , from 7,9% in 1979 to 5,6% in 1989 were registered for the two minorities. As for 1999, the Russian minority decrease was smaller, stopping at 1,8%. The explanation could be that, after the dismantling of the Soviet Union, many Russians returned to their homeland. The same dramatic decrease is seen in the case of the Jewish minority, that emigrated to Israel during the same years’ span. With the exception of the Tsakhurians, whose number almost doubled over the same years, in the case of the other populations the figure remained more or less stable.

Several cultural minorities’ associations exist now, having a Coordination Council, under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry reform team has started a joint project with OSCE, on “Cultural pluralism in Azerbaijan”, one of its strategic issues being that of supporting intercultural dialogue.

When asked to formulate priorities for their communities, the representatives present at the meeting came up with the following: support for education and publications in their languages; support for their traditions in order to prevent them from becoming extinct; financial support, up to the creation of a Fund for the cultural development of minorities; better opportunities for communication, including networking. Actually, communication was the way for them to help the others see them the way they see themselves, in a mutual enrichment process.

We understood that the Ministry is working at a national program for minorities. The experts’ team is glad to have contributed, with the occasion of the meeting mentioned, that was open and outspoken, to a better assessment of their needs, which would help formulate a policy for the future, both at national and regional levels.

4. CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Azeri society has to face and adapt itself at a quick pace to the unprecedented mutations brought about by economic changes. In an environment of intense challenges, of a political, economic and social nature, culture can be called to play a major role by helping society to get better adapted to these huge structural changes. Cultural policies, if flexible and user-oriented, can become a formal instrument in creating or maintaining a durable social cohesion.

Culture has gradually become, besides its contribution to quality of life, community building, civil society development, an asset for positive human growth. The trend in the last decades was, for the governments, to pass legislation to protect cultural environment and heritage, to provide financial assistance and to establish new cultural institutions or infrastructure. The economic impact of culture and business sponsorship of the arts have assumed a new importance, determined also by insufficient public financing.

In the last few years, many studies were dedicated to the subject, that has also become a theme for policy-shaping international conferences. As one of the outcomes, a kind of „matrix” was developed of why culture and the arts are relevant to today’s business. One can talk of the following arguments: the development argument; the cohesive society argument; the marketing argument; the knowledge economy argument. The leading role has always been granted to heritage.

4.1. Heritage and Development

”Knowing the past is the best way to know the future”, and heritage is, as Ruskin beautifully named it “the lamp of memory”. It was also Ruskin who wrote about “the strength / of past buildings / which, through the lapse of seasons and times, and the decline and birth of dynasties /.../ connects forgotten and following ages with each other, and half constitutes the identity, as it concentrates the sympathy, of nations.”

Azeris are very proud of their historic heritage, and indeed they have every reason to be so. It ranges, all over the country, from the mesolithic stone carvings at Gobustan, the Zoroastrian temple at Atesgyakh, near Baku, the Shirvanshah Palace and the whole of Icheri Shekher – the medieval city of Baku -, the Albanian church of Kis, the Shekhi fortress and palace, the impressive buildings dating from the first oil boom in Baku, to numerous other samples of beautiful and very respectable heritage cities, fortresses and mosques, churches, temples and vernacular buildings, all testimonies of a multicultural and multiethnic past.

Heritage means also museum and library collections, traditional culture and is, as Pierre Nora underlines it, a concept in evolution, whose tendency is to include, more and more, the immaterial – having to do with culture, memory, identity. In other words, with the delicate, fragile fabric that creates the spirit of communities and keeps them together.

It is precisely this delicate fabric, torn and destroyed in the past of countries in transition, that represents the key and center of future sustainable development. Why? Because it is through social cohesion, through collective will and self-assumed participation, that communities can go forward and build their future.

In a little book, issued by The World Bank and Unesco, in cooperation with the Government of Italy, whose title is “Culture Counts. Towards new Strategies for Culture in Sustainable Development”, and which summarizes the ideas and recommendations of an international conference held in Florence in 1998, with the aim of building bridges between the worlds of culture and of finance, the message delivered is: development must be a process of creative participation, and the role of culture, in the sense described above, can no longer be disregarded. This new approach, first made by Unesco, is also the core concept of the Council of Europe study “In from the Margins”.

At this point, we have chosen two examples that we considered significant for what integrated projects based on cultural assets can mean for the development of a city and, also, how they should be approached in the case of the selection of new sites in the future for this purpose.

The first example, a tangible model for the country, is the World Bank Heritage and Sustainable Development Loan, whose destination is the restoration of the Shirvanshah Palace and the old city of Baku. Through the care of the Azerbaijani authorities and in compliance with Unesco standards, the site was accepted on the World Heritage List. One of the requirements and commitments to be further fulfilled by the country on whose territory such a site exists, is to provide for its restoration and maintenance. At the same time, the main requirement of a World Bank loan for heritage and sustainable development, is that it contributes to the development of the infrastructure, services, tourism, traditional arts and crafts and, last but not least, to community building and participation. It is true that Baku has been for a long time a cosmopolitan and sophisticated city and the first oil boom, at the end of the XIXth century, that made its international fame, added to the medieval city the charm of an impressive, eclectic architecture – the houses of the oil barons and of rich merchants of the time, as well as several public or community buildings. Villa Petrolea, the residential park built by Alfred Nobel for the oil engineers, or buildings such as the Ramanov and Tagiev houses, to give only two examples, are other attractions to be valued.

Around the historic center of the city there are other cultural assets that have quickly developed: an attractive trade with traditional arts and crafts the country is so rich in – carpets, kilims, wood and metal carvings, embroideries, pottery, jewels; caravanserais and restaurants opened in restored old buildings, with a very refined traditional cuisine; art galleries; book stores. Baku has a strong cultural life, in spite of economic difficulties and precarity of funding – an outstanding Opera House, good theatres, a central library on the way of modernization, rich museums.

The experts’ group had, through the kindness of the Ministry of Culture, the privilege to meet a young Bakuvian any city could be proud of: Fuad Akhundov, a brilliant example of an active community member. Thanks to him – a walking archive of his city history (and he was indeed carrying his personal archive, with documents and photos of old Baku and outstanding Bakuvians) – we became acquainted with those stories, those characters, those buildings, those particular monuments and ornaments, that make the personality of a city. It is such people that should be supported to better value their knowledge and passion.

It was surprising to assess how quickly Azeris react and get adapted to market economy opportunities and challenges, once they are even slightly encouraged to have personal initiative and value their spirit of entrepreneurship. Robert Kaplan, the renowned American journalist and traveler, who visited Azerbaijan first in 1993 and for the second time in 1999, was struck by a number of positive changes in the quality of life in Baku, the restored

nineteenth-century buildings, the availability of consumer goods and the improvement of services.

The second example is, for the time being, very different. It tells about the city of Shekhi – a precious jewel situated in the northern part of the country, in the lap of the Caucasus Mountains. Same heritage assets, naturally at a much smaller scale: a graceful summer palace – Shekhikhan's Palace – with superb, vividly coloured, still very well preserved frescoes, but deprived of a heating and humidity control or an alarm system, practically no information about the site (with the exception of a little, faded brochure dating back from the '70s); a medieval fortress, a handsome city architecture, an impressive caravanserail (subject to local heating and electricity shortages), talented local artists, including excellent traditional craftsmanship, a theatre (with good actors, but a reduced number of performances), a small museum, nice but unattractive, because not much is being done to raise the interest of the public. It is still a dormant city, with a brilliant past and a promising future, waiting to be revitalized if a new trend of development is going to be taken into consideration.

During the talks the experts' team had with the local officials, particularly with Mr. Ashraf Mamedov, the Head of the Local Executive Authority, it was obvious that there is little space for local initiative and project design, due to present legislation, the lack of local resources, an insufficient budget historically allocated, mainly for salaries, building maintenance and small restoration works and, also, the absence of trained staff in cultural administration and marketing. An interesting issue raised was the prospect of re-creating the old Silk Road, where Shekhi used to be situated in the past. This, in conjunction with recent projects regarding a New Silk Road, which means a new route for oil and gas pipelines, accompanied by railways and truck routes, could become a serious opportunity for the city, only if handled correctly in order to avoid environment, landscape and heritage damages.

A comparison between these two examples gives an idea of the complexity of such tasks and also of their advantages. They were chosen to reflect better the huge gap existing between Baku and other cities of Azerbaijan and to call the attention upon finding ways of making reform and new policies reach these places, if the local authorities are not delegated to implement them.

As this kind of projects cannot develop without a full government support, the experts' team recommends the establishing of a cross-ministerial cooperation group, in order to explore and co-ordinate plans redefining the cultural and heritage potential of the country as a tool for development - with the participation of the ministries and departments in charge of education, youth, economic development, public works (road infrastructure), industry (electricity), telecommunications, tourism, environment, health and social welfare, and the local public administration.

Governmental and local public authorities joint explorations could also have as results issues such as: culture and job creation, in times when the economic decline and the closing down of obsolete or polluting industries, as well as huge migrations from rural areas contributed to the increase of the unemployment rate; arts and health; city policies; youth participation.

4.2. Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is also regarded in Azerbaijan as a sector of development, with multilateral and bilateral aid, as well as direct foreign investment to support its projects. The Azeris see in

tourism a growth potential, which can create employment and generate income. The country has rich museums and art galleries, historic monuments or cities, mosques and churches, temples, heritage parks, caravanserais, places commemorating recent history. It is also a country with a very strong traditional culture and customs and with a warm sense of hospitality, as well as a country that has been for many centuries part of old commercial routes. The development of cultural tourism in Azerbaijan needs a set of prerequisites, in order to enable it to become a national and international attraction, besides the infrastructure related necessary improvements: to develop the attractiveness of the place (surroundings, streets, signaling); to have an adequately trained staff; to surround the site to be visited with tourist services; to develop a welcome and orientation system for tourists (information, translations, guides, catalogues; to encourage the growth of tourism-related small and medium- size enterprises; to facilitate the re-discovery of national heritage after years of soviet domination.

4.3. Cultural Industries

Cultural industries – cinema, publishing, press, audiovisual and phonogram production – that went through a serious process of decline, combined with a massive privatization, can become, thanks to their huge potential and visibility, a good attraction for creating partnerships with the corporate world. To these we can add the new technologies, that practically did not exist a few years ago and the industries of the future –tourism, leisure and high technology, that require interesting contents and creative ideas.

With the exception of cinema and book publishing, whose development is state-supported, and whose administration has recently been taken over by the Ministry of Culture, all the others are independent and not financed by the state.

With the financial support and co-operation of the Soros Foundation, the Ministry of Culture started a project, “Cultural industries in Azerbaijan – present-day situation and perspectives of development”, undertaking a study of the cultural industries’ market, copyright issues and a sociological research of the field. The results are not yet public, but, almost simultaneously with a quick development, many problems have been identified so far, mainly related to copyright and taxation legislation. The National Report states that there would be a mistake for the state policy to underestimate this “enfant terrible” – as the sector is called in the text -, and that conditions should be provided for legal business to be conducted, for taxation legislation improvement and advisory and technical assistance. To give only one example, 95% of the video film production is a result of piracy. A Copyright Agency has recently been opened and acts in co-operation with other bodies, such as the police and courts of law.

There are 18 TV channels operating now in Azerbaijan, both public and private; satellite and cable TV are also operational. Besides those in Azeri language, there are also 4 Turkish and 3 Russian TV channels; near the respective borders, Iranian, Armenian and Georgian channels are also accessible. A cultural channel is about to be opened soon. State censorship has recently been lifted, but there is still a complicated mechanism of licenses. A Public Council under Presidential administration is granting now licenses, both for TV and radio broadcasting.

A license is also necessary to open a publishing house. There are now 49 publishing houses and 65 printing houses in Azerbaijan, both public and private. Azerbaijani authors, insufficiently available in Soviet times, and children’ books are one of the priorities of the

public policy in publishing. The Latin alphabet, officially introduced in 1991, has operated a division among the readers; i.e., young people can read only texts using the Latin alphabet, readers up to the age of 30 both Latin and Cyrillic, and readers above 30 only Cyrillic. This must also be taken into account regarding an adequate provision of libraries with books.

The cinema industry was seriously affected, from lack of funding, in the last 4 years. From an average production of 15 films yearly between 1991-93, to 8 films in 1994-98, no full-length film has been produced since that time, with the exception, of course, of short and documentary films produced by the 20 independent studios existing now. Under the circumstances, it is understandable that the Ministry of Culture took the temporary responsibility of giving a new start and impetus to the sector, until independent film companies, joint ventures and private investments will create the conditions for a sound development. A good example for the time being is the independent Azerbaijani International Cinema Company, a joint venture between the Union of Cinematographers and ITIL, a British company. An excellent initiative was to create a State Film Fund and the Film Archives.

Although the field is very young for the country, the new technologies have had quite an impetuous start. An important part of Azerbaijan Development Portal, created in 2000 and financed by the World Bank, with state, private and civil society input, deals with culture and the arts. UNESCO and the Japanese Government have supported a huge multimedia project, the Digital Silk Road, whereas the Soros Foundation, besides funding a multimedia CD on Shirvanshah, is assisting cultural institutions and publicatoins in creating their own websites. The Ministry of Culture has also planned to create a Portal on Culture, with heritage sites and cultural and artistic events.

Cultural industries have an enormous potential for the future. If well managed, and an adequate advocacy exists for partnerships with the cultural world, this can create very soon a mutually beneficial relationship.

5. DEVELOPING CULTURAL STRATEGIES IN AZERBAIJAN

There is a very concise formulation in the National Report regarding the general strategic aims of the cultural policy of Azerbaijan: preserving the past, supporting and developing the present, and providing for the future.

This seems to be a good basis for identifying and proposing strategies that could serve implementing the statement of general aims quoted above.

To start with, the Ministry of Culture took upon itself a huge endeavour, that of reviewing the cultural policy of the country. This is an important first step in rethinking and implementing cultural reform and we cannot commend and congratulate enough the determination of the Minister of Culture and the team in charge with the National Report to have a thorough and honest evaluation, which meant hard work and many difficulties, reflected in the structure of the report itself.

The experts' team is fully aware, and so is the Ministry of Culture, that the National Report, together with the independent evaluation report of the experts, means only a first step in the elaboration of strategies for the future. It is after a wide national debate, that will follow the presentation of the two reports, after research and also partnership and communication with the third sector, that coherent strategies, capable of "providing for the future", can be elaborated.

There are in general, for the cultural sector, a number of general tasks governments have to think of, and where ministries of culture have to play their strategic leadership role: reform and implementation of cultural legislation; the changing of attitudes, by information, training and examples (that show good practices and opportunities); meeting expectations of various sectors and actors; providing essential funding and support for projects and institutions of national interest; safeguarding heritage; encouraging creativity and participation; providing policies for the young; encouraging cultural diversity.

All these tasks are present in the "State program for the development of Azerbaijan culture", a 5-year strategic plan that was designed at the end of 2001, which demonstrates that the Ministry of Culture indeed sees the National Report as the first phase of a reform process.

A rather recent initiative, that has been successfully experimented in other European countries, is culture advocacy, which means raising the visibility, the needs and the advantages of culture and the arts for other domains of development and creating close co-operation between various government bodies, and also the business community, in favour of culture, by putting it on their agendas. This leads to better integrated action plans that enhance every aspect of public policy, bringing at the same time the support of other interested factors. There are already a few successful stories in Azerbaijan about integrated projects, but they do not represent so far a strategy.

A strategy for trainers' training in the cultural sector is also one of the main tasks to develop for short and medium term. No reform can be implemented without having a critical number of cultural managers and administrators, at the Ministry, local administration and cultural institutions level. This will be followed by sectorial reform programs, as, for instance, for museums, libraries, theaters.

The STAGE Project of the Council of Europe was designed to meet precisely the cultural reform challenges of the three countries of the South Caucasus and assist them through the difficulties of transition to implement changes. By designing regional co-operation projects and sectorial reform support (i.e. in the field of museums, libraries, training), it fosters regional partnerships and contributes to the stability of the region.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

Our evaluation has reached the point when we feel that a set of conclusions/recommendations, aimed at assisting the Ministry of Culture to grasp a better definition of its reform policy and take further steps ahead, becomes necessary. They take into consideration Azerbaijan's realities and potential and, having a pragmatic and applicable approach and content, are meant to serve to the national or sectorial debates that will follow the presentation of the two reports. We have also had in mind the participation in the debates and the decision-making process of local authorities, cultural actors, artists and NGOs.

In the National Report it is stated that cultural change was not from the top but part of a process of reflection. The National Report and the experts' review are part of this and there is a need to strengthen the process. There is also a need to add participants in this process, in order to allow development and reform, to introduce change as part of a dynamic evolution and in particular encourage and nurture change from the bottom up.

1. The Ministry of Culture acts and is seen as the major agent of change and reform implementation. With the declared view to set the same pace for reform, it has taken upon itself the centralization, under its authority, of departments and sectors that were under a different administration, such as the historic monuments committee, cinematography and publishing. At present, both the minister and his reform-oriented team enjoy credibility and confidence, both within the administration and with the cultural world. In order to encourage this very stimulating level of confidence to evaluate from an individual or group level to an institutional level, we would highly advise the organization of training programs for cultural administrators, that would enable people in key ministry positions to better identify and respond to changes needed in various sectors. They would do so after having the right input from specialists, cultural actors or groups that could thus contribute to bring about the appropriate changes.

2. The Ministry of Culture has a good opportunity of redefining its role and responsibilities in the future vis-à-vis the cultural institutions and the cultural world. Instead of being a general "provider/implementor" of centralized authority and direct management and money, a gradually implemented decentralization and deconcentration could allow in the future the shifting of its role towards reform coordination, cultural policy and support to culture.

3. We recommend that the Ministry issues a statement, in the form of a public document, on the issue of what its direct responsibilities are and where they end. This statement should also include the way it relates to NGOs and views the role of the latter as a partner in the implementation of cultural reform.

4. The Government and the Ministry of Culture should establish a careful legal and public strategy for financing culture. This would mean:

- instead of ad-hoc solutions (i.e. raises in salaries for a few institutions or categories), to think of appropriate sectorial salary raises, that are very low, compared to the average salary level of the country;
- more permissive budget regulations, enabling financial support for: projects, instead of institutions, through free and open competitions, particularly for the film industry,

publishing, performing arts; private cultural institutions, such as theaters, cultural centres, through the same process as above; NGOs, in various partnership projects, including application for international project financing;

- the handling of financial support through the decision of independent specialists' panels, as a signal of transparency;
- Sponsorship legislation, that would encourage support from the corporate world;
- Tax exemptions or the introduction of VAT 0 facilities.
- Legal changes that would allow cultural institutions to create support associations, whose role is, among others, to supplement funding for various projects (i.e. Friends of Museums Associations, etc).

Such measures would also enhance participation and confidence from the cultural world.

5. Institutional and relationship changes must be carefully studied before implemented; they must not be operated just for change sake. Instead, they should be oriented towards the results/outcomes they produce.

6. There is a natural need or desire to preserve institutions, but these institutions need to reinvent themselves and their functions, identify their audiences and ensure there is compatibility in what they are offering and what is needed. Such is the case of museums, that are losing their attraction to the public, and, subsequently the visitors' number is decreasing dramatically, because they are slowly adapting themselves to new policy requirements, i.e. programs that would correspond to public needs. This is happening in spite of the fact that many new museums have been opened in the last decades. Such is also the case of public libraries, although computerized access to information is being introduced in the most important ones. A better relationship with the public, research that would conduct to the identification of public needs, education programs for the youth, a new feature of their activity , as community resource centers, would contribute to enhancing their role. Financial support for equipment purchase is also necessary.

7. We recommend that the Ministry of Culture continue its policy development process by creating a Cultural Policy Observatory or Unit, mainly based on the experience already acquired of the national report team, for research, information and monitoring. This unit would continue to assist the Ministry in the elaboration of cultural sectorial policies, in compliance with the economic and political evolution of the country and the increase and diversification of cultural needs.

8. In general there is a need to widen the base for problem-solving, official debate and consultation. We recommend the setting up of issue-based "task forces" for this purpose, which draw on a wide range of people and specialists and include people with different views and interests.

9. Communication with civil society is still very weak, although there are 80 cultural NGOs registered with the Ministry of Justice, and the same situation applies at the local authorities level. In the longer term, the role of civil society and local authorities in developing the cultural sector will be extremely important. In order to explore and experiment in this area, we recommend that pilot projects for civil society and local authorities in relation with culture are designed and developed in one of the regions focussing on redefinition of culture (in a practical and applied way, not in a theoretical sense), participation and decision-making. We appreciate the Ministry's intention for the future of broadening contacts with NGOs and involving them in joint projects. New areas of activity should be explored, such as

community arts, arts and development, arts and cities' regeneration, arts and health, arts and the youth.

10. Apart from traditional programs, including artistic education in schools, that are very well developed, cultural needs of the young are little explored. In the demographic structure of Azerbaijan there is an extremely large percentage of young people; there is a danger that the cultural sector and its institutions are not addressing or responding to these new audiences and new needs. Because the reform process has to take account of this, we recommend the creation of a "task force" within the Ministry that would research youth cultural participation and needs, in order to better respond to their level of expectations. The state program "Children of Azerbaijan", aimed at identifying and supporting talented young people reflects a positive reaction.

11. We recommend to continue the implementation of a national program for minorities and to support their contribution to the cultural diversity of the country. We also view this as a key issue for the openness to other cultures outside the country.

12. The Ministry should see one of its more important core functions and duties as providing practical information on legislation to make current and new legislation relevant to the cultural sector properly known to make it truly active. It should do this in various ways, including by training and public debates on rights and responsibilities.

13. There is a huge need in artistic and cultural management and administration training. We recommend the organization of staff training for these fields, involving people that will become the key instruments of reform implementation in all cultural sectors, with the support of local or locally established NGOs and European organizations.

14. In general, the concept of culture as a cross-cutting issue has not yet become relevant in Azerbaijan, which limits both the opportunities for culture and the arts to play a fuller role in society and economy. We strongly recommend that a better advocacy for culture and its role in sustainable development, positive human growth, as well as the creation of a partnership between the arts and business, is developed by the Ministry, as a core strategy in relationship with other government structures. This would have as a consequence:

- the perception of culture as a reform sector;
- the perception of sustainable development projects based on culture as win-win situations;
- the creation of a favorable climate for alternative sources of financing for culture;
- the creation of a dynamic view of culture.

15. Cultural tourism is an important development asset for Azerbaijan and an opportunity to raise the visibility of the country at the international level. In order to enhance the huge touristic potential of the country, we recommend the following to be envisaged:

- To develop national cultural tourism strategies and criteria;
- To create an inter-ministerial co-operation regarding the necessary infrastructure for the development of tourism: roads, services, electricity modernization;
- To organize promotion for: cultural awareness, evaluation and monitoring, Azeri cultural itineraries, etc;
- Information dissemination: interpretation, directional signage, UNESCO World Heritage information, cultural tourism on the internet or newsletters;

- Institutional co-operation: with private sector promotion and marketing, project development assistance, co-operative management and policy- making;
- Promotion and support for public-private sponsorship;
- Organizational development: employee incentives, links, tourism task forces;
- International marketing: promoting and supporting niche markets, cultural festivals, etc;
- Building on the specific features of the rich Azeri culture;
- Promoting the importance of multiculturalism and cultural diversity of the country.

16. We recommend the dissemination of “successful stories” in the process of cultural reform as excellent incentives for people or institutions to follow: i.e. the Baku Opera House support project, the Shirvanshah Palace restoration project, the National Library computerized information, etc.

17. We salute the increasing participation of the country in international programs and projects, besides the traditional bilateral agreements with several countries in the world and the relationships with ex-soviet countries. Azerbaijan’s active part in TURKSOY, the Organization of Turkish Speaking Countries, is a good example of regional co-operation. Azerbaijan has a lot to offer and for this it needs to have more contacts with other countries of the world, particularly in the region and with other European countries. The country’s participation in the Stage Project will help to better value its distinct cultural richness.

ANNEX I

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ANNEX II

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Second Visit, January 21 – 26, 2002

Baku

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Aybeniz Hadjiyeva, Curator, History Museum
Roman Akhmedov, Inspector of the Department of Culture.